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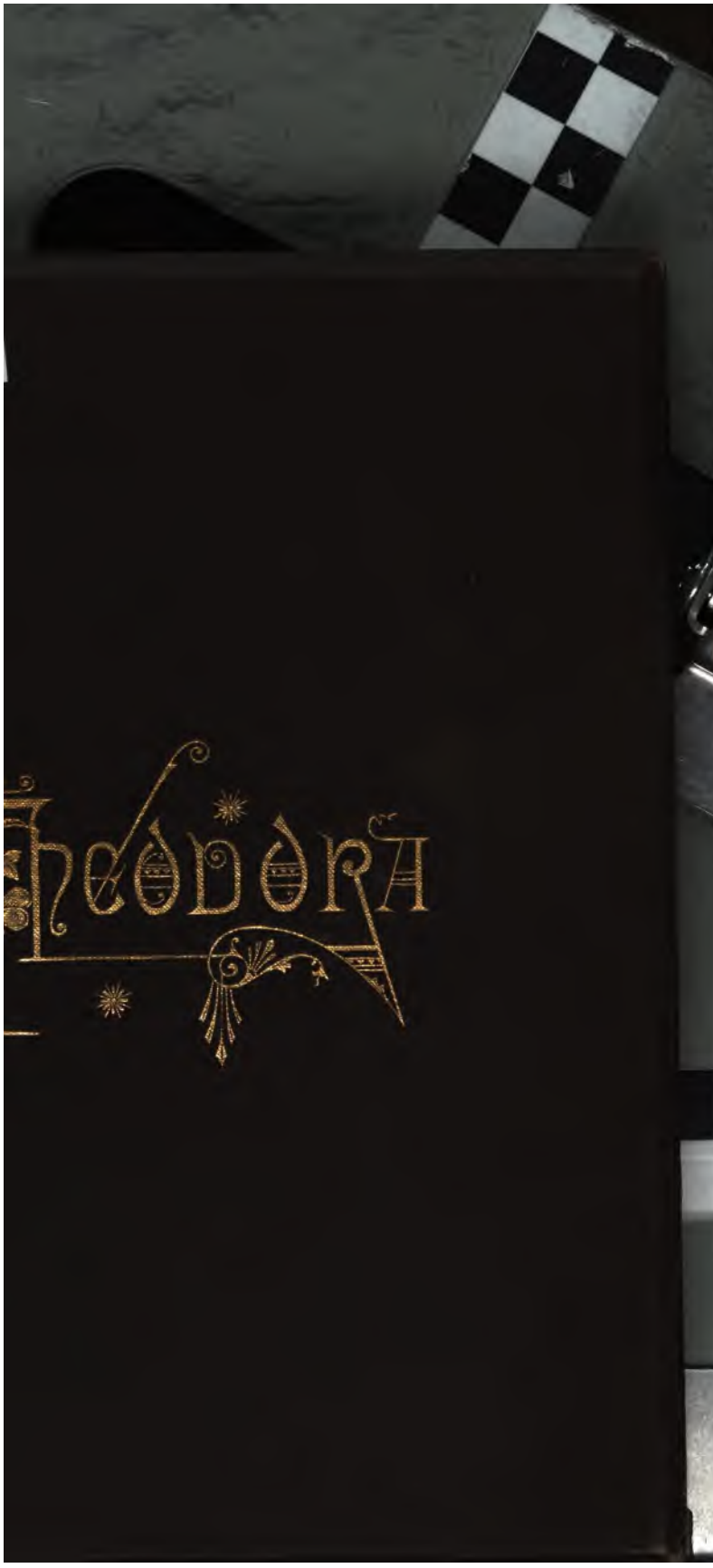
Theodora

Poetry, American

NBI
Willard

# THEODORA:

## A CHRISTMAS PASTORAL.

BY
FRANCIS HOWARD WILLIAMS.

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PHILADELPHIA:
J. B. LIPPINCOTT & CO.

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# DEDICATORY.

I THINK some lives there be that weave a thread
Of God's own sunlight through the woof of Time;
Whose presence permeates a wintry clime
With summer's sense of joy; whose generous bread
Is cast upon the waters. Such have fed
The deepest human hunger, and my rhyme,
Freighted like some quaint mediæval chime
With Heaven's blessing, would to such be wed.
Take, then, this slender tribute from my hand;
Mayhap the bud may one day break to flower;
Yet, if not so, thy love will leap the bars
That hedge fruition in a barren land,
And still thy soft eyes on my life shall shower
A light as holy as the patient stars.

# THEODORA:

## A CHRISTMAS PASTORAL.

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CHIME, chime,
Chime, chime,
Louder and lower,
Now farther, now nearer,
Chime, chime,
Faster and slower,
Now fainter now clearer,
On to eternity
Swinging forever,
Time, time,
Time, time,
Wondrous maternity,

Always and never
Dying and born again,
Chime, chime,
Morning and eventide,
Evening and morn again,
Chime, chime,
Youthful at dawning,
At sunset so old,
Youthful at eventide,
Aged at dawn,
Ceaselessly yawning
To swallow the beautiful,
Stolid as fate
Yet as fleet as the fawn;
Early and late,
For the false and the dutiful,
Bearing the chalice
To lips that are cold;
Conquering malice
And human malevolence,
Spreading a pall
Over love and benevolence,

Hiding endeavor
Forever, forever,
  All, all,
With a mantle of mould.

TIME, time,
  Time, time,
On thy tide bearing
The young and the daring,
  The timid and old;
Revealing despairing
And pitiful faces,
By torches that, flaring
And flung from their places,
  Go out as a tale that is told.
    Rhyme, rhyme,
Weave me a story
Of sorrow and glory,—
  Of glory as golden,
  And sorrow as olden
    As time, time;

Make me a history,
Show me a mystery,
  Rare, rare
As a song from above
Or a picture of Love,
  Fair, fair,
In a setting of gold.

THIS was the song the old clock sang, as slow
  The ancient hands seemed lovingly to trace
Weird shapes and shadows from the firelight glow
  Athwart the numbers on the ancient face.
Aunt Hester's chair creaked out a sleepy rhyme
  As back and forth she rocked in reaches long,
The while her needles marked a counter-time
  To the quaint phrasing of the old clock's song.

Snug in its disc of comfortable light,
  The lamp spoke Christmas welcome to us all,

While oak and resinous pine gave each its mite
To fling a ruddier halo on the wall.
And we were five,—Aunt Hester, Dora, John,
Faith and myself. Since childhood's hour when we
Were full of childish games which time anon
Chills to decorum, we had thought no tree
Could bear its fruitage of unguessed delights
To glad the season otherwhere than here;
And as our faith in genial Christmas sprites,
And saints more genial, lessened, the good cheer
And merry-making of the olden time
Waned nothing. And each season had we come,
Finding life silenter but more sublime
Within the atmosphere of hearth and home.

Faith was my sister; John our cousin, far
Removed in blood, but nearer in our love
Than brothers oft; and Dora? Dora's star
Had risen hid in mist; below, above,
Where we knew not, only that it was bright,
And she as good as fair. A mystery clave

Unto her, and when we had sought new light
  Touching her origin, Aunt Hester gave
But meagre answer, and with bended brow
  And lip compressed, showed how our words disturbed
The quiet of her mind. We questioned now
  No more, and curiosity, once curbed,
Grew patient of the rein. We could but find
  In Dora (Theodora was her name
But Dora sounded tenderer,) the kind
  And loving sister, evermore the same.

So, as we sat and kept the custom born
  Long, long ago, to watch the deep'ning night,
And see the eve of Christmas melt to morn,
  A sense of awe commingled with delight
Possessed our souls. And, wondrous in its tone,
  The ancient clock sang louder, then so low
Its cadence sank that on our ears a moan
  Vibrated in a rhythmic ebb and flow:

TICK, tock,
Tick, tock,
There's never a soul
That findeth the goal
Till over the sleeper
The hand of the reaper
Hath swept.
Tick, tock,
Tho' only a clock,
My heart in its altar
Hath kept
The truth, the devotion,
The rhythm and motion,
The knowledge worth knowing
Of life,
That, ebbing and flowing
Like tides of the ocean,
Change never, nor falter
In coming or going,—
In peace or in strife.

AND as the song hung trembling in the air,
We gazed upon the quaintly carven wood
Surmounting the clock's case, and noted there,
Once more, the wreath of myrtle, like a hood
Drooping across the face; for since the years
Were dim in distance to our memory's eyes,
No Christmas came, whether or joy or tears
Were more akin to us, than our surprise
Found fresh food ever to find ever thus
A new wreath of sweet myrtle, like a crown,
Placed on the old clock's brow. But still to us
Aunt Hester gave no answer, or to drown
All unwished questions, put us off with show
Of explanation, vacant to the mind,—
So vaguely general that our thirst to know
The wherefore piqued us evermore to find
New form of questioning.
Why should we ask?
The time was one of feast and merriment;
She decked the clock because she found the task

Of decking it so easy, and it lent
New beauty to its polished panels, brown
With scores of Christmases to newly wear,
Each year, in royal state, its royal crown.
Why should we ask?
And, so met, in despair
At length our questions ceased. Yet still full well
We knew there was a reason in her heart,
Which haply she should find it meet to tell
Anon, and thus the wreath became a part
Of our observance of the day. So now
We looked upon it lovingly, while slow
Around that crowned and venerable brow
The melody still kept its ebb and flow:

LOW, flow,
Flow, flow,
Winter and Summer,
Autumn and Spring,
Over the grasses
They come and they go,
Go, go,

And every new-comer
Is eager to bring
A joy as he passes,
A pledge of his might;
The purple and glow
Of the clustering masses,
The mantle of white
And immaculate snow,
Snow, snow,
The flame that discloses
The heart of the night,
The blossom and flower
Of Summer, whose power
All other surpasses,
In love ever firmer
Tho' fleet in his flight;—
The Summer that whispers
"Delight!" to the roses,—
The roses that murmur
To Summer: "Delight!"

THEN, as we hearkened to the song, Faith's care
For household duties, doubly deep to-night
By reason of the Christmas-time, and rare
With promise of some triumph of her might
And skill in cookery, drew her away
To those mysterious realms below-stairs, where
Undreamed of odors and steams unctuous play
In appetizing wavelets in the air.

John, too, found need (he always found a need
To follow whither Faith went) once again
To rack the cider; (he who ran might read
The mystery in that); so, therefore, when
The clock next sang, there were but left we three,
Aunt Hester, Dora and myself, to hear
The rise and fall of its weird melody,
So far away, yet evermore so near.

SING, sing,
Sing, sing,
A beautiful boy
Came over the flowers,
Came over and passed
Like a vision of joy
To invisible bowers;
Came softly, and fast
On the vanishing hours
Took wing.

WHETHER some cadence pregnant in the ear
Awoke a memory of vanished days,
Or whether there was that within the clear,
Sweet murmur of the song that touched the haze
Of reverie about us and let down
The bars of reticence, I know not; yet
Upon Aunt Hester's brow the half-formed frown
Had passed away, and in its stead was set,
Bright as a star, a diadem of peace;

And, looking steadfastly at Dora, she
Said softly: "Patient waiting brings release
From every fetter of necessity.
You, child, have questioned oftentime to learn
Whence you are come, and all the rest to know
The wherefore of my actions, sometimes stern,
Yet ever love-dictated. This brave show
Of green at Christmas,—my care thus to grace
The ancient clock with myrtle, and at eve
To watch the shadow fall across its face;—
All this you've wondered over. By your leave
You shall ne'er wonder more."
And as she spoke
I saw how Dora trembled, and the fire
Which lived beneath her eyelids leaped and woke
Another flame that lit her cheek, and higher,
Was quenched where it began. Then she grew pale.
And well I noted what a sad, sweet smile
Aunt Hester's face wore as she told her tale,
The ancient clock low murmuring the while.

# Aunt Hester's Story.

YOU both remember hearing how the dam
Which lies behind the village, storing force
To nerve the mills in thirsty summer, calm
But dangerous in strength, once from its course
Swerved the quick river, and in mad career,
As freshets from the mountains in the Spring
Pressed from behind, swept on, till far and near
Houses and barns lay wrecked, and everything
In the flood's path was desolate. That day
Is fixed in many memories; in my own
It burns an endless sorrow, though I pray
Not now an unavailing one. You've grown
To womanhood and manhood since that time,
But both have heard how, of the noble men
Who offered a self-sacrifice sublime
On the destroyer's altar, dying when

Strong living arms were powerless to save,
None nobler than my husband worked and died,
Nor, dying, to his race a pattern gave
Of more divine devotion.
When, a bride,
I laid within his brawny hand my hand,
And felt how firm its touch, and heard the word,
"I, Henry, take thee, Hester," that same grand
Power of love ineffable that spurred
His soul to noblest effort, shed its light
Around me and about me, and I knew
My husband for a hero.
Ah, how bright
The years were then,—five golden years that drew
Our hearts into a union closer yet,
And gave an added holiness to life,—
The jewel of motherhood that God had set
Within my royal diadem of Wife!

Here was our home, this room our sitting-room;
The shy clematis hid itself as now

And clambered at the lintel; there, where bloom
The potted roses on the sill and bow
To every waft of air, the roses grew
And bowed as gently.
Thus we lived, till came
That awful night, when on the gale there flew
A cry of death, and leaping like a flame,
The torrent sped across the fields.
Away
To aid in saving sprang my husband, strong
To battle with the waters; but the day
Which dawned on wreck and ruin brought along
The warrant of my doom. He had been seen,—
My Henry,—doing work of half a score
One moment in the abyss that lay between
Mad flood and flood. *I* saw him nevermore!

Thus was I widowed ere one summer's rain
Had taught my heart the meaning of life's storms,
Or grief had given the power to wear a pain
In long enduring silence. So the forms

Which my great sorrow took were stern denial
Of God's own goodness, and a stubborn mind
To bow not to his mandate. A new trial
Was needed, and as they who seek oft find
In most repellent structures the sought pearl,
So I must needs be broken yet again
By grief to find my peace.

Our little girl—
Ours, for I had not dropped the title then—
Grew paler than her wont, and ceased to play;
Forsook delight of sunlight and of air,
And as some fragrant flower fades away
At coming of the frost, so, in despair,
I saw her slipping from me. Days to weeks
Fled onward, weeks to months, till Winter's hold
Was loosed on tree and shrub, and all the creeks
Sped on again to where the fields enfold
The shining river like a silver band
Woven through russet tapestry. The earth
Grew blithe in Spring, and yearning to expand
Her inner love to love's new outer birth,

Bloom'd 'neath the kiss of sunshine into quick
And warm maturity; the Summer fled
Herself as fleetly, and in bowers thick
With her own gorgeous panoply, lay dead
Ere we had half embraced her. Autumn came,
Lived a brief life replete with gold and glow,
And, ere our lips could speak her lovely name,
Died on a bed of fallen leaves and snow.
Then, as the days came close to Christmas-tide,
The child whose eyes had shed the only ray
To keep my wounded spirit from the wide,
Tossed sea of desolation, sank away
Ever and ever weaker; and my moan
I made in whispers, praying she might live
With such hushed vehemence as they alone
Who once have loved, and loving lost, may give
Or understand the giving of.
And oft
I heard the old clock on the thread of time
Slow telling off the beads; and from aloft
Where sky is wed to sky, a voice sublime
Bore in upon me whispers sad as tears.

A terror seized upon me, and my will,
Stubborn till now, broke 'mid a world of fears,
And I cried out: "Have mercy, Lord, nor fill
This dread cup to the brim!"
Still, still the flame
Burned lower, and I saw a pallor chase
The life from cheek and brow, and strange lines came,
Unearthly lines in her unearthly face.

Till one day, as in quest of Paradise,
The sun rolled down the West, all gold and red,
An angel put the light out in her eyes,
And I was sitting silent with my dead.

Ah me, ah me, 'twas twenty years agone,
Yet seems but yesterday. Time grows so fleet
As we grow older, and each hasting dawn
Comes closer to the sunset. It were meet
I pause a little, for I scarce may trust
My heart to bide the telling of my grief,

For hearts will sometimes falter tho' they must
Go on at last to breaking or relief.

[Here pausing for a moment in the tale,
Aunt Hester pressed her temples wearily,
As though some memory, struggling to prevail,
Must be thrust back and conquered.
Cheerily
At the same moment Faith and John appeared
Within the doorway, full of conscious pride
Of duty well performed. And, as they neared
My chair, I plucked John's sleeve and spake aside
Of what it was that hushed our lips and led
To this unwonted silence and repose.
Then good Aunt Hester, taking up the thread
Of her sad story, wove it to its close.]

Some souls there be (blessed that such should be)
That meet affliction half-way, well content
To garner where they've sown tho' misery
Deck out the harvest.

Mine, tho' well I meant
Ever to bow to Heaven, was never thus
Submissive, and I railed against my fate,
And beat my pale hands in tumultuous
Frenzy upon the bars. Love bade me wait,
And still I railed at Love; and as the days
Came to their shortest I grew wellnigh mad
And on the eve of Christmas, as my praise
I strove to offer, I thought on the glad,
Gay hearts that then praised also, and I wept,
Alas! such bitter tears. Then I rose up,
And would have flung the holy book I kept
Beside me far away, for this dread cup
Was more than I could drink.
Yet, as I stood
Irresolute, the cadence of a song,
Sung by the clock, enchained me ere I would,
And bore my being on its tide along:

WAIT, wait,
Pitiful fate
Bringeth thee joy,
And the golden gate
Stands open to Love,
Tho' he cometh late.

WAIT, wait,
Sorrow nor hate
Ne'er shall destroy
Nor leave desolate,
For God is above,
And God is great.
Wait!

AND while I paused, half lost in wonder, came
A gentle tapping at the outer door,
And, as I opened it, the dying flame
Of the hearth's embers leapt and seemed to soar
In sudden exultation.

On the sill
Stood motionless two children, one a boy
Divinely beautiful as dreams which thrill
Celestial sleepers with celestial joy;
And at his side a little girl, whose eyes
Looked trustfully in mine. Then, as I spread
My arms to welcome them in glad surprise,
The girl was there, but, like a vision fled
To lovelier realms, the boy was gone.
The snow
Bore tiny footprints, and as close I bent
To mark their course, they seemed to gleam and glow,
For each was filled with flowers, whose perfume lent
To Winter all the redolence of Spring.
I led the girl within. The voice of Fate
Resounded in mine ears, and lingering
In dying echoes whispered: "God is great!"

Then wreathing 'round the clock the flowers which dressed
The earth where'er that foot divine had trod,

I took the little wanderer to my breast,
And called her—Theodora, Gift of God.

---

Aunt Hester ceased, nor spake one other word,
Only held forth her hand to Dora, who
Stood motionless and rapt, as one who heard
Some far, unfathomable song borne through
The phalanx of the ages. O'er her brow
The hair hung heavily, and fashioned there
A shadow soft as sleep, that trembled now
As trembled on her lips a silent prayer.

I dared not speak; there was too much of awe
In Dora's mien. Against the ancient clock
She leaned, and as I gazed on her, I saw
How her slight fingers tightened at the shock
Of each pulsation of her fluttering heart.
Across the antique panel her white arm
Gleamed, for her sleeve, worn loose, had fallen apart
And left it bare from wrist to shoulder, warm
With throbbing life but chaste as marble.

Now
The great log on the hearth, burned to the core,
Brake suddenly, as though it would endow
The scene with its own glow; a mighty roar
Came from the chimney's throat, and left and right
The sputtering sparks leapt on the ample stone,
And flung the crimson halo of their light
'Round Dora's figure, standing there alone.

Then the clock sang, in tones which seemed to roll
From lip to lip of some angelic choir,
The anthem of a liberated soul
Touched with the glory of celestial fire:

CHIME, chime,
Chime, chime,
Linking to-morrow
To æons of ages;
Chime, chime,
Sponging out sorrow



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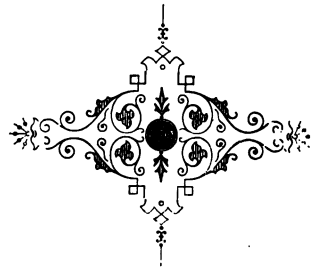
From all the marred pages
  Of time, time;
Onward the river
Is flowing, still flowing,
  Liquid as rhyme,
  Rhyme, rhyme,
Forging a chain
That has never an ending,
  Lost, and alone
With eternity blending,—
Back to the Giver,
  And on to His throne.
Evermore glowing
Where myriads sing
  Peace, and the reign
    Of The King.

HEN in the silence to our ears was borne
The stroke of midnight, and, as angels sing,
We heard strange voices welcoming the morn,
The morning of the birthday of The King.